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Handling Coronavirus In Federal Prison



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f The coronavirus, identified by the [Center for Disease Control](#) as **COVID-19**, spreading and has rapidly become a priority for nations around the world.

in While the common influenza strains are responsible for tens of thousands of deaths each year, coronavirus has had a profound effect on our social interactions. Countries, including the United States, are taking measures to prevent the spread of the disease and the [White House](#) is holding daily briefings and events related to the government's efforts. Outbreaks of diseases like this are even more difficult to manage in closed environments, like prisons. So what's the plan?



Prison interior. Jail cells and shadows, dark background. 3d illustration GETTY

Inmates live in close proximity to one another. In federal prison camps, inmates are housed in an open dorm layout that is sectorized into 2-man living quarters, similar in size to office cubicles ... except for the concrete walls. Each cubicle has a bunk bed, a writing desk/chair (usually bolted to the floor) and two lockers. Outbreaks of influenza and stomach virus are a constant concern in this population who also share toilet and shower facilities. "People in prison can only quarantine themselves so much and still have no choice but to keep themselves in some contact with every inmate no matter how ill they might be," [Jack Donson](#), a former BOP case specialist, told me.

The BOP has a standard [protocol for handling common influenza](#), most notably reminders for everyone, staff and inmates, to wash their hands and avoid shaking hands. It should be noted that the act of shaking hands is very much an integral part of inmate programming where they are taught social interaction skills, something meant to serve them well beyond prison.

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Inmates who become ill, may be grouped with other inmates who have the flu so as to keep it from spreading throughout the prison compound. The inmates are limited in the areas in which they can move and also could be fed in a separate area. It can be an even more confining environment. In the event some inmates develop high fever or symptoms that institutions cannot treat, they are transferred to local hospitals.

When inmates are transferred to local healthcare facilities, families may be notified that the person is being treated outside of the prison but family visits to the hospital are not normally allowed according to Donson. Families, who already receive little information on their incarcerated relatives, may have

ever less communication if hospitalization becomes a reality. In a hospital there is no inmate email ([Corrlinks](#)), no secured phone service and no way to receive mail.

In 2017, the Federal Bureau of Prisons dealt with another outbreak that caused a national health scare, [Zika virus](#). Zika is a virus transmitted primarily through the bite of an infected mosquito. The BOP's primary concern was for pregnant inmates who could pass on the virus to their unborn fetus causing birth defects.

However, there is growing hysteria around coronavirus that is particularly problematic for prisons. "The BOP has been understaffed for years and keeping those incarcerated calm is of utmost importance," Donson said. At any given prison camp, where over 16% of all federal prisoners are held, there are less than a handful of corrections officers overseeing hundreds of inmates. Many administrators at a prison, including secretaries, health officials, and educators, double as corrections officers. Inmates, like the general public, are watching network news and see the issues that are facing the country on controlling the outbreak. "They are just as scared at what can happen as anyone," Donson observed, "and when there is nowhere to go, it is bound to raise anxiety."

Every federal prison location has a contingency plan for emergencies. As coronavirus concern spreads in advance of the actual infection, the BOP is likely going through a protocol to handle this crisis. "The BOP has procedures to address most any emergency situation," Donson said, "but carrying it out is always a challenge for large government organizations, especially the BOP."

In a federal prison camp, some inmates have direct contact with the community, even running errands in support of prison staff. "In the event of

an outbreak of coronavirus in a prison,” Donson said, “it is likely the prison would stop all interaction with the community.”

Concern would not be limited to inmates. Prison staff, concerned for their own safety, could call off from work, creating a shortage of staff in a tense situation. If an outbreak were to occur, sick inmates would be transferred to hospitals or treatment centers requiring even more staff for supervision. It could be a compounded problem if labor is short and demand for supervisory increases. “The BOP has to have a crisis plan beyond what is normal protocol here,” said Donson.

Iran reportedly took a drastic measure to avoid a coronavirus infection in prisons when the government [released over 50,000](#) prisoners. Those released had to test negative for the virus, have less than 5 years to serve and be able to post bail. There are [currently more than 175,000 federal inmates](#) who are anxiously waiting to see how the BOP handles this looming crisis.

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